

NIC Gives Jail Classification a Big Boost

Project Will Soon Provide Jails with Objective Classification System and Implementation Guidelines

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Jails constitute the most widely-used component of this nation's criminal justice system. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, more persons experience jail than any other form of correctional supervision; total jail admissions in 1986 exceeded 8 million. These persons present wide-ranging risks and needs, which in turn create complex and demanding issues to be addressed by jail administrators. Among these issues is inmate classification, a vital component of effective management, but one that has been neglected, primarily because of the high volume of admissions and the rapid turnover among jail populations.

In 1986, the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) Jails Division, aware of the need for improved inmate classification, launched a project to develop an objective inmate classification system that would meet the unique concerns of

jails and be readily adaptable to jails of all sizes. The 30-month project, conducted by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency and Correctional Services Group, Inc., consisted of three separate but interrelated phases:

- **Phase One** defined the functions of a jail classification system and, based on a literature review and national survey of jails, identified a set of objective criteria that are accepted indicators of inmate risk and need.
- **Phase Two** focused on the design of standardized screening and classification instruments, using findings from Phase One. Project staff also developed effective strategies for implementing the classification system.
- **Phase Three** entailed field testing of the system at three sites: the Hillsborough County (Florida) Sheriff's Office Detention Department, the Johnson County (Kansas) Adult Detention Center, and the Marion County (Oregon) Jail. Staff at the three sites were trained to use the system and were provided ongoing technical assistance as needed. Project staff closely monitored the implementation of the system and assessed its operation.

The project team is now evaluating field-test data obtained from the sites and talking with their classification staff about ways to improve both the classification forms and the procedures for using them. This information will be used to revise the objective classification system so that it can easily be tailored for use by jails nationwide.

Unlike the relatively "subjective" approaches to inmate classification used by most jails, objective classification relies on a narrow set of well-defined legal characteristics (e.g., severity of current charge, prior convictions, and prior incarcerations) to guide classification. These characteristics are incorporated into a standardized form or checklist that is used by staff to assess inmates' custody and programming needs. Emphasizing fairness and explicitness in decisionmaking, objective classification is characterized by the following elements:

- Use of classification instruments that have been validated for inmate populations;
- Use of the same classification approach for all inmates;



- Promotion of similar decisions among classification staff on comparable cases; and
- Assignment of inmates to custody levels consistent with their backgrounds.

The objective jail classification project is in its final stage and, when completed this summer, will have resulted in the preparation of a number of useful products designed to improve classification practices:

Jail Literature Review

This is a comprehensive review of jail classification as it exists today. Included is a look at the evolution of jail classification, prior research on jail and prison classification, recent court decisions affecting jail classification, descriptions of subjective and objective systems, and guidelines for developing jail classification system.

Survey of Jail Classification Systems

This product summarizes the results of a national survey of jails to determine current approaches to inmate classification. The survey was conducted in the spring of 1987 and utilized stratified random sampling to ensure adequate

representation of large, medium, and small jails. The report addresses commonly-used classification factors, personnel responsible for classification, information available for classification purposes, and training in classification.

NIC Objective Jail Classification System -Final Report and Executive Summary

This will be an account of the activities and results of the objective jail classification system project. It will provide an overview of the project, a description of system development, a chronicle of the implementation process at three test sites, a report on the results of system evaluation, and a discussion of the policy implications of implementing the classification system.

NIC Objective Jail Classification System Description

This product will be a compilation of the forms used in the NIC objective jail classification system project: a screening form, an initial classification form, a reclassification form, and an inmate needs assessment form. The document will include detailed instructions for completing the forms, along with suggestions for adapting them to

meet agencies differing needs. In addition, a discussion will be provided to indicate the function of each form and its appropriate use within jail operations.

NIC Objective Classification System Training Manual

This training manual will provide an outline of the curriculum and training modules necessary to train jail staff in the use of the objective classification system. The manual is aimed at training staff, who can use it to develop a two- to three-day training class for classification and intake staff. The manual covers the history of classification, legal issues affecting classification, the components of the objective classification system, adaptation of these components, implementation of the system, and methods of evaluating system effectiveness.

If you are interested in learning more about the objective jail classification system or in adapting it for use in your facility, contact Jim T. Barbee, Correctional Program Specialist at the National Institute of Corrections Jails Division, 1790 30th Street, Suite 440, Boulder, Colorado 80301, or telephone him at (303) 939-8866. ■

